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Public Relations in the Turbulent New Human Climate

ABSTRACT: This article is based on talks delivered to chapters of the Public Relations Society of America in Columbus, Ohio, and Indianapolis, Indiana, in Fall 1990.

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When we contemplate what the future holds for the human climate and for public relations we can predict that it will not be like the predictions of the pundits and social scientists. The human climate has a way of confounding the wishful thinking of people who want it to support their particular desires. Traditional wisdom about the human climate is usually wrong.

There are many positive factors behind the shaping of the new human climate. There will be advances in medicine and other sciences that will remove some barriers and bring new opportunities, for example. But the forces that are likely to be decisive seem to me to be mostly sobering and challenging.

We've just come out of the 80s—a decade that seemed hectic and full of problems while we lived it, but that we'll probably look back on with nostalgia for its good times and its peacefulness.

A century ago we had the "Gay 90s." What will the 1990s be called? One clue is that even the word "gay" in that old label now jangles our sensibilities. Many things are no longer as they once were. Many things are not what they now seem. Many things will not be in the future what they are today. And that includes public relations.

Right now we see the dissolution of our great enemy, the international Communist threat to our peace and well-being. Former enemies are clamoring to create new partnerships, hastened by a sudden new area of conflict. American ideas and ideals seem to be triumphant worldwide. English—American English—is read and spoken by educated people almost everywhere.

Yet at the same time, America seems to be entering an era of disaffection and conflict. We've disposed of old enemies outside our borders. Even as we face new enemies abroad, we feel free to seek and attack enemies we find within. As I'll point out later, it's now part of our psyche to look for others we can attack. And the trends in the world seem to be headed directly at our greatest vulnerabilities—most of which we create for ourselves.

Here's our anomaly: Almost all the factors and forces that led to this situation involve the attitudes of groups of people. Understanding and influencing attitudes is what public relations is all about. So the principles and practices of public relations are integral to what will happen and how our society will reshape itself. But public relations *people* may not be integral to what happens—unless we recognize how *we* must change and take the steps necessary to succeed and not just survive.

First, let's look at the developments that have brought us to where we are.

In summary, we have been living on an artificial high. We're hooked on self-delusion. That high created a level and breadth of prosperity and well-being never seen before. Almost everyone benefitted from injections of artificial hype. We not only created great advances in medicine and technology but we convinced ourselves that we could immediately eliminate all evils—discrimination, stupidity, crime, hatred, poverty, unhappiness. We are so convinced that illness is an affront to our rights that if we're not perfectly cured we sue doctors and hospitals and demand that government do something about it.

Let's take a quick run through the forces that have created the human climate of 1990 in the U.S.

- The spreading effects of technology and science have greatly expanded the universe of human awareness, contact and horizons—from where we used to see things in a narrow sphere, close to home, to where we now can envision the universe of human existence in seconds, and the full universe of the cosmos.
- Electronic communication, especially, has made people everywhere aware of what life *can* be, even to billions of people far removed from even the possibility of fulfillment. It shows ready answers and instant fulfillment—whetting demands.
- Mass education and literacy opened hundreds of windows on the world. Education, even when flawed, displays the great sunburst of what the world has to offer and holds out promise that arouses the person's demands. It promises to make each person it touches someone beyond the ordinary, with claims as well as rights. So it has mass-produced dissidents the world over, who feel entitled to what seems to be promised but find most of what they seek beyond their reach.

This is an age not of rising expectations, but of unattainable expectations.

- We have been transformed from a world in which generations passed with almost no thought of one's status changing, to where almost everyone now believes that he or she counts and must have a voice in everything.
- There has been an exponential growth of the social and economic structure. In 1960 a company making only fountain pens and pencils was known throughout the developed world as a major corporation. That pen company's volume would be a small unit within any of hundreds of corporations today. In 1960 the total U.S. budget was \$76½ billion. Today the *deficit* is more than three times that much.
- This has been accompanied by a management revolution. The professional manager was trained to concentrate on the measurable figures and to shun "fuzzy" matters that can't be processed with the computer—all matters having to do with people's attitudes and expectations.
- Along with this new class of professional managers has arisen an almost opposite new class of what is called intellectuals. They resent a world that puts higher store in running our organizations and institutions than in their ideas and language. They're sure they know best how all aspects of our system should be run, but shun as crass the functions of running them. Among many of their contradictions has been strong denunciation by this intellectual elite of elitism. They were so determined to deny that *anything* can be measured that they insisted there is no difference between good and bad. Mediocrity was glorified. Pass-fail was touted as the ideal grading system. Unions disciplined workers who sought to do better or more than their least-effective counterparts. Examinations to judge ability—particularly for teachers and other intellectuals—were fought ferociously.
- The combination of bloated expectations that all things can be provided, that all ills have a ready antidote, that science (even while creating new menaces) could come up with new miracles on order—these led to a whole society searching for easy answers.

In rapid order masses of people sought their answers in zen, transactional analysis, psychosynthesis, est, bioenergetics, scientology, energy flow, dance therapy, biofeedback, groping, sensitivity sessions, copper bracelets to fend off arthritis, Ankh emblems to propitiate the gods, charismatic religions, rolfing, Tufi, Tai Chi, pyramid power, pendulum power, Silva mind control, Satan worship, encounter therapy, primal scream, consciousness raising, talking to plants, ego states, stroking, transcendental meditation, the human potential movement.

While each of these arose and faded, their followers continued to attack the stable organizations that made society function.

Stability offered no promises of miracles; orderly procedures could not fulfill promises overnight.

- Social engineers and governments everywhere contributed to building up expectations by funding their promises with inflated money. By promising to eliminate risks they magnified the losses—as in S&L insurance and Medicare. Yet even while this universal Ponzi scheme accelerated, dissatisfaction grew, because always what has been delivered is overlooked amidst the growing clamor for more.
- Dissatisfaction with the institutions of society grew exactly while the greatest strides in history were made in the spread of education, improvement of general health, achievement of opportunity for hundreds of millions, goods and conveniences provided, comforts and luxuries afforded to most of the populace, availability and variety of recreation, availability of culture, and mental uplift.
- With expectations held out at ever higher levels, the dissatisfactions led to self-fulfillment of the “promises”—the feeling that “I’ll get mine” that has led to a contagion of rip-offs, cheating, fraud, defaults on debts, stock manipulation and shoplifting; and outbursts of vandalism, aggression and riots. Crime rates have shot up and tolerance of the crook has become part of the human climate cultivated by social engineers.

Now—just when this mass delusion that everyone can have everything reached its peak—the world has turned. Unattainable expectations are running smack into grossly decreased possibilities of fulfillment.

We are 245 million Oliver Twists all calling “More” while the flow of goodies is running thin.

Those expectations blossomed while the U.S. enjoyed a unique monopoly—unmatched since the days of the Roman Empire. From 1945 till about 1980, it was the U.S. ahead of all the rest of the world. We took it for granted that the bulk of Olympic medals would come to us; the bulk of Nobel prizes and major inventions, most literary awards, and—of course—most of the money.

The expectations blossomed while we were buying the snake oil of the social engineers and agitators. Our high of delusions led us to weaken things in the name of improving them: our schools by insisting that we could raise standards while destroying them to help the lazy, the stupid and the vicious; our health care system by insisting that we could multiply demand without affecting the supply or the cost; our businesses’ ability to compete worldwide by forcing them to hire the unqualified and pay for many mandated social engineering schemes, and by discouraging innovation through government intimidation and ludicrous liability suits. And all this was done with debt and not work, with phony money that until now someone else would pay.

What happens when the thrust of expectations runs into the collapse of a fraudulent monetary binge? Well, what happens to individuals who never learned to make do instead of discarding things, who seldom forego a pleasure or a gadget? What happens when artificially low costs of gasoline, electric energy and other benefits are interrupted and costs shoot up? What’s happening to the hundreds

of people on Wall Street who had to stretch on half-a-million a year and are now reduced to 100 thousand? To the millions who feel entitled to the wild increase in prices of homes when not only did rises stop but offering prices actually dropped?

TV stars demand their fees go up every year—from \$30,000 an episode to \$35,000—even though viewership has been going down for years. CEOs push through 15 percent raises for themselves even when the companies' earnings go down by 50 percent. Auto workers—whose constantly growing demands contributed mightily to their companies' inability to compete—talk about striking unless their jobs are guaranteed for life—at those inflated wage rates.

So what happens when it dawns on the American people that the monopoly on the good life is over, that low energy costs have probably ended, that the credit binge has ended, that the pot is smaller and shrinking? What happens to the activist groups that grew and became empowered by making demands when they find that people no longer easily accede? What happens when people who slid through school, learning little and ignoring work habits, find there are no soft spots where they can demand constant raises and security and take off at 3 o'clock every Friday?

What happens will be shock and resentment. Just as people look for someone to sue whenever something goes against their wishes, millions of people will be looking for someone to blame—except themselves.

In many cases, they'll blame those who have no connection with what they're unhappy about. We're likely to see recurrence of anti-Black, anti-Oriental, and anti-others prejudices and attacks.

The majority of Americans were apathetic while activists' demands were met. It's natural to be beneficent when things are going well for you, even though there are still things you want and feel entitled to. But attitudes change when people not only see their new expectations thwarted but erosion of what they have.

Resentment and resistance will build against all those who are perceived to have gained advantages without meriting them—the activist and “rights” groups of the era between 1950 and 1989, the spending programs and special concessions. The culture of entitlement will collide with the mania of the comfortable to hold on to what they have.

That will make the division between the pro- and anti-abortionists seem like a simple problem, because we will find many forces opposing many other forces—creating multiple conflicts, with new alliances, new pressures, new sabotage, new assaults.

Now, what does this mean for public relations?

In a way, it looks like it could all be a public relations industry plot—because it's hard to imagine any set of circumstances that could be more conducive to the demand for public relations help. Every group will confront other groups out to take away its privileges or impose new costs. Every organization will have to cope with activist and counter-activist pressures. Just as the orgy of unattainable expectations turned us into a litigious society and created lucrative careers for thousands of lawyers, so this confrontational society *should* turn us into a society of pleading, arguing and communicating hordes, enriching thousands of public relations people.

But what will be the reality?

Just when almost all the forces I've mentioned revolve around mass human attitudes, the receptivity to that orientation is at a low ebb among decision makers. Management is increasingly oriented to measurable and computer-driven facts; to what is measurable in numbers; to immediacy rather than to evolving patterns; to the visible and tangible rather than the nuances of human feelings and motivations.

But it is within the public relations field itself that most of the difficulties lie.

As a result, public relations will probably go on growing in numbers and in universality of its use—while slipping in stature and influence. There will be more people doing more things—except having a role in the top levels of our institutions.

There is sure to be a growing demand for people to help managements meet these new public relations problems—but there's no assurance that they will be public relations people. Many others are more aggressive, more numbers minded, more willing to do whatever managements say they want and then label it public relations or some other euphemistic title.

There are a number of reasons for this downgrading of public relations' stature:

- Many public relations people have muddled perceptions of this field by using a wide array of inappropriate terms. (See my Report of the Special Committee on Terminology.) Most people in this field now use "public relations" and "publicity" interchangeably. And the only examples they cite of the work done is *publicity* efforts—dealing with the media, getting space or time, running opinion campaigns. And then we wonder why the publics—including management—have no clear idea of the true nature of this field.
- The demand for measurement and accountability—which is probably inevitable—is too easily satisfied by doing only what is measurable—and that means publicity and other communications. The most valuable things we can do for clients usually are not measurable—helping them avoid making mistakes, imbuing them with a sense of the human climate, advising cooperation and networking instead of conflict, shaping positions and perceptions. But that's lost sight of in the rush to deal only with what can be spelled out in numbers or column inches. So the high-level functions are ignored.
- The changing makeup of the population in the field is another complication. Women have proved that they are highly capable of doing the work—but the fact that this may become a largely feminine field has consequences. It is being seen as a "soft" field—one in which some useful things are done but that is not a heavy-hitting top management function. The impression that this is a field for women is discouraging capable young men from going into it. And studies show that most women entering public relations aspire to functional roles rather than to policy making.
- The takeover of most large public relations agencies by advertising agencies has had a negative effect on the perception of this field. First, it has accentuated the impression that we really just do market-

ing publicity. And second, outsiders assume that any field that is subordinate to another one is inferior to it. Since few advertising people are seen as top-management people, it's even less likely that public relations people will be seen that way.

- There are still many internal public relations executives who want only specific functions from their outside sources—not top-level thinking and creativity. As a result, others in their companies see only technicians and specialists and have no inkling of what professional counsel can offer. Those internal people are likely to find they won't progress beyond the tactical level.

So we have an anomaly. The field is growing; the demand for people who can perform is high. Yet there are probably fewer people who really have the respect and ear of management than at any time in the past 20 years. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of people can aspire to the top professional level. The self-interest of all others is to be happy with what there is for them and not to rock the boat by standing up for higher standards and better understanding.

Now that I've offered the pessimistic side of the picture, here are some suggestions for what can be done to forestall that pessimistic outlook:

1. Establish *high* standards for what public relations is. It's *not* just getting publicity or *just* communicating. Those are only useful functions within its scope. Its overall role is to help organizations and their publics understand and work with each other. It involves *understanding* and *shaping* the human climate to mutual advantage. Some of its most important functions never result in any communication outside the executive offices.

The art of communication is a *function*, not a *purpose*.

2. Demand high standards throughout our society. Favor the *good* and the constructive over the *poor* and the destructive. Scorn the mediocre instead of worshipping it. Advancement comes from making people overcome tough challenges, not from making it easy for them.
3. *Require* tough education and *work* in our schools at all levels—with far more homework than hours at the TV. And education should never stop: "Adult education" should be a description of the well-lived life.
4. Public relations people must be intelligent, not just glib. *Read . . . reflect . . . reason*. It's a scandal that this field with more than 200,000 practitioners in the U.S. alone has only one publication with a circulation of 10,000 and that the most thoughtful ones have less than 3,000.
5. *Earn* respect. Be invaluable to employers or clients by adding to their intelligence, not just by doing their chores.

6. Select and honor people on the basis of their *depth* and *high standards*, not superficiality that emphasizes show over substance.

The next few years will be wrenching ones for our society. What happens in the Middle East may shake attitudes in our society in devastating ways. People in many fields are seeing their roles shrinking and manpower decreasing—finance, banking, manufacturing of durable goods. We in public relations, on the other hand, could be on the threshold of a boom—if we prepare ourselves and use our persuasive skills to steer the frame of mind of our populace toward discipline, restraint, recognition of demands for better performance—in other words, toward reality.

Great challenges bring with them great opportunities. As a profession we can grasp those opportunities or we can let them go by default. That's the challenge to public relations in the next few years.